

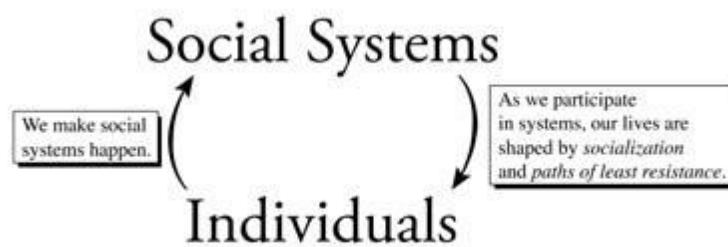
THINKING SOCIOLOGICALLY

- Sociology finds its way into almost every aspect of life, from headlines in the morning paper to the experience of growing older to the ravages of war, injustice, oppression, and terrorism in the world. It is about things small and large, things simple and things complex far beyond what we can imagine.
- Thinking sociologically helps us to solve the dilemmas of a diverse and difficult world in which race, gender, sexual orientation, disability status, and other forms of privilege, power, and oppression cast dark shadows over people's lives. We can practice thinking sociologically when we read a newspaper or turn on the television or go to the movies. We can practice when we walk down a street, shop in a market, or sit in a sidewalk restaurant, sip a cup of coffee, and watch the world go by and wonder what life really is all about.
- There is so much unnecessary suffering in the world, and to do something about that suffering we need to understand where it comes from. In this sense, practicing sociology has a profoundly moral dimension. By moral Allan G. Johnson does not mean "moral" in the sense of being good instead of bad, but "moral" in a deeper and broader sense that touches on the essence of what we're about as human beings and what our life together consists of. It is impossible to study social life for very long without coming up against the consequences that social life produces, and a lot of these consequences do such damage to people's lives that, unless we find ways to deny or ignore reality, we feel compelled to ask, "Why?" And once we ask that question, we need tools to help make sense of where it leads and to imagine how we might go from there toward something better.
- Thinking sociologically not only helps the world but also makes it easier to live in, especially given how crazy a place it can be. It helps to be able to see how one thing is connected to another, and, in that, how to find ways to make a difference, however small. We can't change the world all by ourselves, but we can make informed decisions about how to participate in it and thereby help turn the world toward something better, even if it's just in our neighborhoods or families or where we work or go to school.
- Sociology is a collection of facts and terms about almost everything, from the family to economics to politics to crime to religion to the intricacies of conversation. It's like high school social studies, but at a higher level. Looking at all these varied aspects of social life isn't by itself sociological, however, because many disciplines look at these same areas. Criminal lawyers, legal scholars, and judges, for example, study crime; economists study economics; political scientists study politics; anthropologists, psychologists, historians, and divorce lawyers study families. But this doesn't mean they're practicing sociology. This makes it easy to think that sociological practice is everywhere, that when the New York Times or CNN or PBS or your favourite blog

comments on something “social,” they’re practicing sociology. It’s also easy to think we can learn as much from reading the newspaper and watching television or surfing the Web as we can by practicing sociology. As a result, many sociologists go out of their way to impress upon people that what they do is more than common sense. They’re right, of course; it is much more than common sense (now I’ve done it, too), but having to convince people that it is more than common sense is a situation that sociologists have largely brought upon themselves.

- Allan. G. Johnson in his book “ The Forest and the Trees – Sociology As Life, Practice and promise.” Writes- “If sociology could teach everyone just one thing with the most profound effect on how we understand social life, it would, I believe, be this: We are always participating in something larger than ourselves, and if we want to understand social life and what happens to people in it, we have to understand what it is that we’re participating in and how we participate in it. In other words, the key to understanding social life is neither just the forest nor just the trees. It’s the forest and the trees and how they’re related to one another. Sociology is the study of how all this happens.” The “larger” things we participate in are called social systems, and they come in all shapes and sizes. In general, the concept of a system refers to any collection of parts or elements that are connected in ways that cohere into some kind of whole. We can think of the engine in a car as a system, for example, a collection of parts arranged in ways that make the car “go.” Or we could think of a language as a system, with words and punctuation and rules for how to combine them into sentences that mean something. We can also think of a family as a system—a collection of elements related to one another in a way that leads us to think of it as a unit. These include things such as the positions of mother, father, wife, husband, parent, child, daughter, son, sister, and brother. Elements also include shared ideas that tie those positions together to make relationships, such as how “good mothers” are supposed to act in relation to children or what a “family” is and what makes family members “related” to one another as kin. If we take the positions and the ideas and other elements, then we can think of what results as a whole and call it a social system.
- Systems and people are closely connected to each other, and seeing how that connection works is a basic part of sociological practice. What happens when people participate in a social system depends on two things: the system and how it works, and what people actually do as they participate in it from one moment to the next. What people do depends in part on the position they occupy in relation to the system and other people in it. People are what make a system “happen.” Without their participation, a system exists only as an idea with some physical reality attached. A society may be “racist” or “sexist,” but for racism or sexism to actually happen—or not— someone has to do or not do something in relation to someone else in the context of one social system or another.

FIGURE 1-1 Individuals and Social Systems: A Dynamic Relationship



So, social systems and people are connected through a dynamic relationship, pictured in Figure 1-1. People make systems happen—consciously or not—and systems lay out paths of least resistance that shape how people participate. Neither people nor systems exist without the other, and yet neither can be reduced to the other. The complexity of my life isn't some predictable product of the systems we participate in, nor is a social system an accumulation of our own and other people's lives.

- What results from all this are patterns of social life and the consequences they produce for people, for systems themselves, and for the world—in short, most of what matters in the larger patterns. The emotional problems we struggle with as individuals aren't due simply to what kind of parents we had, for their participation in social systems—at work, in the community, in society as a whole—shaped them as people, including their roles as mothers and fathers .human scheme of things.
- Sociological practice uses more complex models of change that focus on several different levels of social life at once. Consider, for example, the problem of pollution, which a growing number of communities around the world have to deal with. Suppose that people in your town start getting sick. Large numbers of children don't show up for school and local clinics and hospital emergency rooms are jammed with patients who turn out to be suffering from chemical toxins. On a purely individual level, we could say that we've figured out why people are getting sick. And to solve the problem in terms of individuals, we could just treat each sick person until they're well and change people's behaviour so that they don't get sick again. If the toxic chemicals are in the water supply, then don't drink the water. Buy bottled water instead. Each person now has a solution to the problem, if they can afford to drink bottled water or, perhaps, install expensive filtration systems in their houses. It would probably turn out that, like most communities, some would be able to afford this individualist solution and some wouldn't, which means that some people would still get sick. Of course we might enact some kind of collective response to this inequality by providing subsidies for poor people to buy bottled water, but notice that we still wouldn't have done anything about the underlying problem of polluted water. We would simply have found a way for individual people to avoid drinking it.
- To take the problem to a sociological level, we have to ask about systems and how people participate in them, and so far we haven't said anything about people getting sick as a systemic problem. People are told to change their private behaviour by not drinking water out of the tap.

- All forms of sociological practice are sociological because they flow from the same basic questions: What are people participating in, and how are they participating in it?

REFERENCES:

1. Johnson, Allan G.2008, The Forest and the Trees: Sociology as Life Practice and Promise, Philadelphia: Temple university Press, Introduction and Chapter 1, ‘The Forest , The Trees and One Thing’.

EXPECTED QUESTIONS:

1. Who wrote the book “The Forest and the Trees : Sociology as Life Practice and Promise?”
2. What do you understand by Thinking Sociologically?
3. What is meant by practicing Sociology?

PREVIOUS YEAR QUESTIONS:

1. Who wrote the book “The Forest and the Trees : Sociology as Life Practice and Promise?”
